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**THE PRACTICE OF OPERATIONAL ART IN OPERATION WESERUBUNG:
The German invasion of Norway in 1940**

by

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**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of
the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily
endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

Signature: _____

For: Col Bill Hartig
CDR Tom Kubista

10 May 2007

In April of 1940, the peaceful and neutral country of Norway became a battleground between Germany, France, and England in their desire to control it for their own war objectives. The Battle of Norway and as the Germans' called it Operation Weserübung was the first major military operation in history to utilize naval, ground, air, and airborne forces in the assault phase of the attack. The German success in this operation provides an outstanding example of the application of operational art and the principles of war by Germany in the early stages of World War II. Operation Weserübung included both the invasion of Denmark and the invasion of Norway. The first phase of the operation was the invasion of Denmark; its air bases were needed for the invasion of Norway, and fell in a single day. The focus of this paper will be on the Norwegian portion of Weserübung.

A quick summary of the execution of Weserübung will follow to help the reader better understand the context of the discussion. The German invasion of Norway was a modern Trojan horse approach to combat that completely neutralized the advantages that the British Royal Navy held over the Kriegsmarine.¹ By taking advantage of the neutrality of Norway and Germany's benign relationship helped to sow the seeds of success in the operation. The Germans civilian merchant ships, coal freighters and oilers for the operation that set sail for Norway several days before the kickoff of the invasion. Upon arrival in Norwegian ports the ships' captains told the port authorities that they were there for routine business and waited for the invasion to begin to offload their cargos of troops and supplies.² Through this tactic a significant portion of the German invasion force slipped past the Royal Navy and were in position for the opening of

¹ From here on out the British Royal Navy will be referred to as just The Royal Navy.

² Adam Claasen, "The German Invasion of Norway, 1940: The Operational Intelligence Dimension," The Journal of Strategic Studies. (March 2004) 131

hostilities on 9 April³. Additionally, the plan called for six simultaneous surprise landings by ship and airplane seizing strategic points throughout Norway.⁴ Through their execution, the Germans achieved surprise, held Oslo, put the royal family and government on the run and achieved a swift victory in Norway.⁵ Further details on the planning and execution of Weserübung will be discussed as we progress through this work.

A background of Operation Weserübung and why Hitler decided to attack Norway will be discussed to give the reader a context for the execution of the attack. Next, the author will outline the objectives of the Germans. This will be flowing down from their strategic, to the theater-strategic, and finally the operational objectives. Then a narrative of the planning of Weserübung will be discussed; this will analyze the operational factors of time, space, and force as they applied to the Germans and how they overcame the inherent disadvantages they held against England. The German exploitation of the operational factors also carried over to the execution of Weserübung as will come out in the discussion of the planning. Finally, the author will demonstrate the operational and strategic lessons learned for Germany, England, and Norway.⁶

Norway was neutral in World War I, and hoped to remain so in the pending conflict that was beginning to engulf Europe in 1939 with the German invasion of

³ Claasen, “The German Invasion of Norway” 114

⁴ These six ports were Narvik, Trondheim, Bergen, Stavanger, Kristiansand, and Oslo. Richard Petrow, The Bitter Years: The Invasion of Denmark and Norway April 1940-May 1945. (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc. 1974) 16

⁵ The operation was not without its problems though as will come out throughout the paper. Examples are the sinking of the heavy cruiser *Blucher* by shore batteries in Oslo fjord, and an incident where German troops were cut off in Narvik in May. They were only saved when the Allies withdrew their forces due to the German invasion of France. The invasion was considered complete and Norway secured in early June 1940. Claasen, “The German Invasion of Norway” 131

⁶ Please note that I am not including any lessons learned for the French from the Battle for Norway. Although they did have troops committed on the ground, their role overall was much smaller than that of the three principle belligerents that are being discussed.

Poland, and the subsequent events that were unfolding on the European continent such as Poland's division by Germany and Russia.⁷ There are three principle reasons for the German invasion of Norway. The issue of Norwegian neutrality was at the center of two, and the desires of the Kriegsmarine were the third. On 1 September 1939, the same day as the invasion of Poland began German diplomats in Norway, Sweden, and Finland informed those governments that Germany intended to respect the territorial integrity of each.⁸ The most important piece of that respect would be that they would have to maintain strict neutrality, and "would not tolerate breaches of that neutrality by third parties."⁹

The issue of Swedish iron ore imports to Germany was one of the reasons the Germans felt that their control of Norway was in their best interest in 1940. With a neutral Norway, the iron ore could continue to flow from Sweden through Norwegian territory and on to Germany. Germany received half of its pure iron from Sweden, approximately six million tons annually.¹⁰ They also had received a further six and a half million tons from areas that the British Royal Navy had already cut off by their blockade.¹¹ Additionally, the ore reached Germany by two main routes, from the Swedish port of Lulea during most of the year, and Narvik Norway between November and April when Lulea was generally ice bound.¹² Allied possession of Norway would cut off the Narvik route altogether, and put them in position to challenge the Lulea route at their leisure. Although one could argue that Germany shipping iron ore through

⁷ T. K. Derry The Campaign in Norway. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office 1952) 5-7

⁸ Earl F. Ziemke The German Northern Theater of Operations 1940-1945. (Washington: Department of the Army 1959) 2

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ David Brown, ed., Naval Operations of the Campaign in Norway: April-June 1940. (Portland: Frank Cass 2000) 2-3

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Derry 10

Norwegian territorial waters was a violation of their neutrality, due to their strong economic ties with Germany it was not in their interest to challenge this practice.¹³

The second motivator for the German invasion was an overt British violation of Norwegian neutrality that occurred in February 1940 and was known as the *Altmark* affair. *Altmark* was a German supply ship that became stranded in Norwegian territorial seas with a hold full of 300 British merchant seamen held as prisoners of war.¹⁴ *Altmark* was on its return voyage to Germany after receiving the prisoners from the pocket battleship *Admiral Graf Spee* before it was scuttled off Montevideo. Royal Navy ships had been tracking *Altmark* for several days and had demanded that a thorough inspection of her be held by the Norwegians to show that she was violating Norwegian neutrality by carrying prisoners of war through her territorial seas.¹⁵ Finally, as *Altmark* experienced engineering difficulties she became stranded near Jøssingfjord Norway and despite vehement Norwegian protest and the inability of the Norwegian Navy to stop them, a British boarding party came aboard and rescued the prisoners. This incident outraged Hitler and was to become one of his primary motivations for carrying out the invasion of Norway two months later. For Hitler it did not matter in the least to him that a double standard existed as to who was responsible for honoring Norwegian neutrality.

The final motivation for Hitler to invade Norway came from the leadership of the Kriegsmarine. Admiral Dönitz had initially originated the idea of seizing selected ports

¹³ Derry 4-5

¹⁴ Petrow 18-30 The rest of the details of the incident that I discuss are summarized from this source from the pages indicated.

¹⁵ *Altmark* had been inspected on three occasions by Norwegian authorities that did not find anything either time. This outraged the British who further demanded that they be allowed to inspect her themselves.

in Norway for submarine bases and brought it up to Admiral Raeder.¹⁶ Admiral Raeder in due course introduced the idea to Hitler of the occupation of Norway in October of 1939; initially the plan just called for bases to be established there, and then a week later for the occupation of Norway outright.¹⁷ Reasoning was that the advanced bases in Norway would enable Germany to forward deploy ships there, and thus avoid being bottled up in the North Sea such as during World War I. By early February 1940 Hitler had made the decision to invade Norway and the planning staff for Operation Weserübung was first stood up.¹⁸ This planning process was built on the foundations of Germany's objectives for the war up to that point down to the operational goals for the invasion of Norway.

Having conquered Poland in only a few weeks and secured his eastern frontier with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, Hitler turned his attention and focus to the West. This would result in their strategic goal in 1940 to be the conquest of France and to pursue peace with England without having to invade. In addition to the ideas that Admiral Raeder had about stationing ships and submarines in Norway, he felt that the Kriegsmarine could use the deep-water ports of Norway to "lay siege to the British Isles with a German blockade."¹⁹ The other portion of theater-strategic objectives for the Northern Front is as discussed earlier about Swedish iron ore imports to Germany, and the need to secure the access to Norwegian territorial seas to transport them. The operational objective for Operation Weserübung was to "...prevent British encroachment into Scandinavia and the Baltic; further, it will guarantee our ore base in Sweden and give

¹⁶ Johs. Andenaes, O.Riste and M.Skodvin, Norway and the Second World War. (Oslo: Johan Grundt Tanum Forlag 1966) 30

¹⁷ David Brown, ed., Naval Operations of the Campaign in Norway: April-June 1940. (Portland: Frank Cass 2000) 2-3 and Derry 17

¹⁸ Ziemke 14

¹⁹ Claasen, "The German Invasion of Norway" 116

our navy and air force a wider start-line against the British [sic].”²⁰ Arguably it may be seen that the operational objectives and the planning for Weserübung supported the strategic and theater strategic objectives for Germany in 1940. The next key to the German success in Norway was through the application of operational art and overcoming their disadvantages in the factors of time, space and force.

The factors of time, space and force played a vital role in the German planning of Weserübung. Where shortfalls existed for each factor, the Germans shaped their plans to maximize their chances of success. For the factor of time several considerations played a role in the planning and eventual execution of Weserübung. The essential factors included climatology, and British reactions with regards to Norway. For the Germans climatology played an important part in the time of the year for the invasion. Although neither side had the desire to begin military operations in Norway during the winter due the harsh conditions of the North Sea, the Germans had a vested interest in utilizing this time period.²¹ They knew that the overall disadvantage that they faced against the Royal Navy would be more acute in spring and summer with its longer days and calmer weather that the timing of the invasion was critical. They needed the period of “generally low visibility, frequent storms, and long nights” in order to give the Kriegsmarine a “reasonable chance of reaching Trondheim and still more Narvik without interception.”²² This portion of the factor of time played directly into two of the principles of war that the German planners used to help achieve success in Norway: mainly that of surprise and maneuver. As will be discussed at length, surprise was a critical part of the success of

²⁰ Anthony Martienssen, quoted in Derry 18

²¹ Derry 21

²² Ibid

Weserübung. Additionally, the time factor with regards to the hours of daylight played a critical role in the maneuver portion of Weserübung.

The factor of time also played a role in the German planning for Weserübung due to the British and French and their actions with regards to Norway. As was seen from the *Altmark* incident both the Germans and British realized that Norway could not adequately protect their neutrality or prevent others from exploiting it for their own war objectives. The British saw continued German violations of Norwegian neutrality through their shipments of war materials coming through Norwegian territorial seas. The British knew that their inaction could not be a long-term solution for the prosecution of the war. From the German perspective, the *status quo* of taking advantage of their benign relationship with Norway they realized that time would not be on their side for long with regards to the British. For both sides it became a question of who would intervene in Norway first. Hitler ultimately made the decision that he could not afford for England to invade and take control of Norway before he had a chance to react.²³

The next portion of the issue of for the Germans was their planning for the invasion of France scheduled for the spring of 1940. The decision was ultimately made based on the planning for the execution of Plan Gelb, the invasion of France. Upon the British seeing Germany violate the neutrality of The Netherlands and Belgium by attacking through them on the way to France the German high command felt that the British could use this as a pretext to put forces ashore in Norway.²⁴ By the utilization of the principle of war taking the initiative, the Germans were able to use time to their advantage to achieve success in Weserübung.

²³ Ibid 23

²⁴ Andenaes 44

Along with Admiral Raeder's desire for bases in Norway, the Kriegsmarine wanted to avoid being bottled up in the North Sea like in World War I. Three key considerations for the factor of space were important to the Germans in the planning process: British mining, new bases for Norway, and maneuver space in the leads.²⁵ In August 1918 as World War I began to wind down in favor of the Allies the British had successfully compelled Norway to mine their own territorial seas in order to deny the Germans the ability to transit them and force them into the waters patrolled by the Royal Navy.²⁶ The Kriegsmarine being bottled up in the North Sea and rendered ineffective for the war effort drew much criticism in the interwar years that had a profound effect on the future leadership of the Kriegsmarine.²⁷ German control of Norway would naturally eliminate this concern and enable to have their naval bases in Norway. The final consideration of space for the Germans was control of the Norwegian leads. With German control of Norway, the leads would also be in their hands and the iron ore imports could continue uninterrupted during the winter months from Narvik. The factor of space was a disadvantage for the Germans where through their initiative in seizing Norway as they did, they were able to turn the factor in their favor.

The final operational factor in the German planning is force. The discussion on force will discuss the relative combat strengths of the three major belligerents. The strength of England for hundreds of years has been the Royal Navy. This was still true in 1940, and had the Kriegsmarine openly challenged it for control of the sea the Germans would have had little chance for success. The advantage for the Germans was that the

²⁵ The leads are the protected channel that runs down the coast of Norway. Claasen, "The German Invasion of Norway" 115

²⁶ Ziemke 2

²⁷ The criticism came from Vice Admiral Wolfgang Wegener who wrote extensively on Germany's lack of a proper naval strategy in World War I and was a strong influence on Dönitz and Raeder. Andenaes 28

British never expected an inferior force to attempt landings in Norway due to the mismatch between the relative combat strength of each. The German utilization of surprise and deception enabled them to gain local sea control to effect their six landings before the British could properly react. For Germany the concern in planning was in overcoming the disadvantages they held against the British because their forces were vastly superior to the armed forces of Norway.

The Norwegian air forces were not a separate service and had only six fighters located on five airfields throughout the whole country.²⁸ The Luftwaffe had little trouble gaintaining [sic] air superiority over Norway and the adjacent seas during Weserübung. The Norwegians had five major coastal fortresses that were to control the entrances to the fjords outside their major cities. However, they were only partially manned and had no supporting infantry to protect them from landing parties.²⁹ The Norwegian Navy consisted of only 63 ships that were mostly out of date World War I era and older ships, only five were considered modern and were spread across the large coast of Norway.³⁰ The Norwegian Navy would be no match for the Kriegsmarine in any sort of open battle. For example, by itself the force sent to support the Narvik landings consisting of battlecruisers *Gneisenau*, *Scharnhorst* and ten destroyers, were superior to anything that Norway could get underway to effectively resist them.³¹ The Norwegian land forces also fell into a similar state of disrepair. Having fully embraced the idea of neutrality and due to massive budget cutbacks in the 1930's the Norwegian Army also was not armed, trained, or equipped to resist the combined arms force that Germany brought to bear in

²⁸ Derry 7

²⁹ The coastal fortifications in the Oslo fjord did have one success though. They were able to sink the German cruiser *Blucher* and forestall the German timetable around the capital. Ibid 7, 36

³⁰ Claasen, "The German Invasion of Norway" 117

³¹ Derry 27

Weserübung.³² An example of the army's unpreparedness for modern combat were the Norwegian cavalry forces. From the 1933 budget it was to consist of tanks, but the funding for them was so small that it took several years to save up for the purchase of just one tank for the entire army.³³

In addition to the German planning for the exploitation of the individual factors as already discussed, they also successfully combined factors to achieve their desired effects. The two examples that will be cited are the use of time/force and space/force. Utilizing the combination of time and force due to the relative strength of the Royal Navy to the Kriegsmarine secrecy and speed were essential for their success.³⁴ Utilizing space and force with regards to gaining local sea control to conduct their landings, the Germans were able to keep tabs on the Royal Navy through their extensive use of aerial reconnaissance.³⁵ By keeping the Kriegsmarine abreast of the location of the Royal Navy the Kriegsmarine was able to avoid them and avoided a fight that they were not prepared to undertake. The surprise and intelligence portions of the planning for Weserübung were successfully carried over to the execution of the operation and were keys to its success.

The planning and execution of Weserübung lead to several operational lessons learned that can be applied to the three major belligerents of the invasion of Norway. Germany will come first, then England, and finally Norway in the discussion. Each were able to share their own unique perspective on the operation from the winner, the loser, to the occupied country. As throughout the history of warfare, the side that is the defeated

³² Francois Kersaudy, Norway 1940. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1998) 9-12

³³ Ibid 11

³⁴ Derry 18-19

³⁵ Claasen "The German Invasion of Norway" 116

tends to gain the most from an operation as it applies to the future, and the winners seldom does.

As the victors and occupiers of Norway for five years, the German lessons learned will now be discussed. The three key lessons learned from the operation were the command and control relationships, IPOE, and the implications of the Altmark incident. There was no over all commander for Operation Weserübung, each branch of the German military was independent of the others. Hitler had hoped to have a unified command, but due to interservice rivalries between the Wermacht and the Luftwaffe the command structure made the German General in charge of the ground forces more a “first among equals” than anything else.³⁶ The C2 for Weserübung was in practice to become a “supported” and “supporting” relationship for the commanders involved. In fact, if there was the equivalent of a JFC, it was the Wermacht High Command (OKW). However, they had no direct operational control of the execution of Weserübung because they had no way to communicate with subordinate units.³⁷ The German command and control were successful thanks to the clear operational objectives, parallel planning efforts, the personalities of the leaders involved and clear commander’s intent for the operation.³⁸ The key take away though is that this operation was the first of its kind in history and the German leadership deserves high marks for successfully carrying out a bold and complex plan. A critical aspect though was that in 1940 the leadership of the German armed forces drew largely from the small cadre of military forces of the by then defunct Weimar Republic that was limited by the Treaty of Versailles. It was natural that this

³⁶ Adam Claasen, Hitler’s Northern War: The Luftwaffe’s Ill-Fated Campaign, 1940-1945. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press 2001) 40-41 and Ziemke 31

³⁷ Richard D. Hooker and Christopher Coglianese, "Operation Weserübung and the Origins of Joint Warfare," *Joint Forces Quarterly* (Summer 1993) 110

³⁸ Ziemke 31-32

group would work well together despite interservice rivalries to gain a common objective. Had personalities been different, or the Norwegians a more competent enemy, the loose command structure that it was could have become unraveled and caused significant problems for the widely scattered German forces throughout Norway. In future joint operations in World War II command structures would necessary become more unified for both the Axis and Allies.

The Germans learned a very valuable lesson on the value of a proper IPOE and assessments of enemy strength and locations. This specifically applies to German reconnaissance aircraft locating the Royal Navy and thereby keeping their movements known to the Kriegsmarine until such a time that they were able to unload their invasion troops and to help them lodge ashore. This utilization of local sea control was a critical factor in the German success in this operation.

The last German lesson learned relates to the *Altmark* affair. The *Altmark* affair is a vital lesson learned for all three of the belligerents as they are discussed in this paper. Even though Hitler was content to violate Norway's neutrality himself by allowing iron ore from Sweden to pass through the Norwegian leads, at least he could claim some legitimacy for it due to Norway and Germany's strong economic ties. Arguably, the *Altmark* took the issue too far. Even though it probably had few other options for returning the prisoners of war to Germany, the risk it took by inviting British intervention would play a significant part in German intervention in Norway. It was a clear violation of Norwegian neutrality, and something that Hitler said in 1939 would prompt a German invasion of Norway.³⁹ The Germans had a favorable situation with Norway being neutral, no troops were committed to the theater and Germany was able to take advantage

³⁹ Ziemke 2

of their trade with Norway and keep the iron ore coming in. The lesson learned for the Germans was to not give your enemies an excuse to ruin the good situation that existed between Germany and Norway prior to the *Altmark* affair.

The British had three key lessons learned from the German invasion of Norway; indecision, initiative, and the *Altmark* affair. The first lesson learned for the British was the fatal flaw of indecision. The only member of the War Council in England that proposed immediate actions against Germany in early 1940 was the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill.⁴⁰ He proposed mining of German rivers, persuading the Norwegians to seize German shipping, and the mining of Norwegian waters.⁴¹ The war cabinet was reluctant to act and the consensus was that they wanted the Germans to make the first move.⁴² That way, Great Britain would not be seen as the aggressor by mining Norwegian waters first, but coming to Norway's aid against German aggression.⁴³ This stalling forfeited the initiative to the Germans and enabled them to act first to invade Norway. By the time the British had made the decision to mine Norwegian waters, Operation Weserübung was already well underway and it was too late. Once Winston Churchill came to power in England as the Prime Minister, the British would be less cautious and would adapt to ensure they would not so easily surrender the initiative again during major military operations.

The next lesson learned for the British also shows the value of initiative, and the pitfall of mirror imaging. This was in relation to the concept of local sea control for amphibious operations. As discussed previously, the Royal Navy was vastly superior in

⁴⁰ Kersuady 53-54

⁴¹ Derry 15

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid

size and firepower to the Kriegsmarine. As a result of this, the leadership of the Royal Navy could not conceive of a situation where the Germans could land in Norway in the face of the far superior Royal Navy. As we have seen though, their use of reconnaissance, secrecy, surprise, and risk enabled them to achieve their objectives in the face of what the British considered conventional wisdom. By mirror imaging their own actions onto the enemy the British did not rely on their own ability to conduct reconnaissance operations in the same scale as the Germans. Thereby they surrendered the ability to have the same situational awareness as the Germans that helped lead to their operational success.

Once again we return to the *Altmark* affair, this time from the British perspective. For the British it became an issue of risk versus reward in order to get their people back that were being held on *Altmark*. Their decision to violate the strict neutrality of Norway by putting troops aboard *Altmark* to liberate their prisoners of war could only have the result of provoking the Germans to act. The lesson learned for the British was two fold. It validated their intelligence source that placed their merchant seamen on the ship. Additionally, it enabled them to take and maintain the moral high ground with regards to Germany's violation Norway's territorial integrity. This sentiment carried over after the German conquest of Norway as the British ran agents and saboteurs into Norway for the remainder of the war.⁴⁴

Finally, we come to the operational lessons learned for Norway throughout the time leading up to their invasion in April 1940. The two main areas for lessons learned for Norway were, their over reliance on other nations, and the *Altmark* affair. Leading up

⁴⁴ An excellent book was written on this Operation called *The Shetland Bus: A WWII Epic of Escape, Survival, and Adventure* by David Howarth

to Norway's invasion by Germany they had an over reliance on other nations that their neutrality would be honored. In the wake of World War I and the forming of the League of Nations they believed that organization would protect them from the aggression of others.⁴⁵ A critical part of that belief was the Norwegian apathy towards the modernization of their armed forces and their woeful state of readiness in 1940 for invasion. Additionally, once Hitler began his conquest of Europe through his actions leading up to and including the invasion of Poland, Norway believed that the blanket of the Royal Navy, and Great Britain would protect it from German aggression.⁴⁶ Lastly, Norway wanted to believe that Hitler would honor the neutrality that he promised them in 1939.⁴⁷ This is a lesson that has repeated itself throughout history, a country must be prepared to defend itself regardless of the international situation, if others are not willing to support and defend your neutrality, you must be prepared to do that yourself. Switzerland has been the benchmark for this idea, remaining neutral in both World Wars through both military and diplomatic deterrence.

The issue of defense of a country's neutrality is the foundation for Norway's second lesson learned from their invasion that the author will discuss. This brings us for the last time to the *Altmark* affair. British warships were able to close with and board *Altmark* despite vehement protest from the Norwegian patrol boat that was present during the incident. Had Norway had more military strength it could have defended its neutrality. One could say that this could have caused a war with Britain to occur, but even had that been the case, a possible British occupation of Norway would have held a completely different flavor than that of the German one that followed. Additionally, the

⁴⁵ Derry 5

⁴⁶ Ibid 6

⁴⁷ Petrow 11

British would likely have been more apt to honor Norwegian neutrality, if they had a way to actually defend and protect it.

The planning and execution of Operation Weserübung was the first major joint operation of its kind in history utilizing naval, ground, air, and airborne forces. Its conduct proves to be one of the most noteworthy applications of operational art and the principles of war during all of World War II. The principles of surprise and security were the most critical in the German success. The German planning taking into account and exploiting the operational factors of time space and force are another key element in why this operation is worthy of further analysis and study. Additionally, the operational lessons learned that could be applied from the belligerents' experiences further illustrate several important lessons that can apply today. From the Germans we saw the importance of planning around apparent disadvantages, command and control as it relates to operational objectives and commanders intent, and the importance of initiative in military operations. From the British, the pitfalls of mirror imaging and a lack of decisiveness can prove fatal in military operations. Lastly, from the Norwegian side we see the importance of national defense for maintaining a nations' own self-determination against outside belligerents.

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